

Virginia Hall, On The Front Lines Of WWII Intelligence War

by Thomas N. Hauser
INSCOM History Office



Photo Credit: Air Intelligence Agency Archives
Virginia Hall is awarded the Distinguished Service Cross by Bill Donovan, chief of Office of Strategic Services in 1945.

Among the stories of service and courage within the annals of military intelligence is that of Virginia Hall. When the United States entered World War II, many women volunteered and found themselves working for military intelligence. Although most were behind a desk, a few like Virginia Hall found themselves on the front lines of the intelligence war. Their stories have become the stuff of books and movies.

Virginia was born in 1906 to a wealthy Baltimore family. With no interest in social climbing, she devoted most of her time to learning languages. Her interest in international relations led her to study at Radcliffe College in 1924 and to take a position with the State Department at the American Embassy in Warsaw in 1931 for what she thought would be a life-long career. Her career path led to positions in Estonia, Austria, and finally Turkey.

It was in Izmir, Turkey where her life changed abruptly and traumatically. Being an adventurer, she often went hunting with her colleagues. While on a chase, her shotgun slipped from her grasp. As she tried to catch it, the gun fired with the bulk of the discharge striking her foot. Although medical help arrived in time to save her life, gangrene had already moved into her lower leg; the surgeon had no choice other than to amputate. Showing her undaunted spirit, Virginia promptly requested a fitting for an artificial leg, later nicknaming her prosthetic companion "Cuthbert."

The accident ended her aspirations in the State Department. State Department officials at that time were not only closed minded toward women, but there was also a regulation forbidding the employment of amputees. Virginia, consistent with her character, refused to allow this reversal of fortune to become a permanent setback; instead, she continued to distinguish herself during World War II in the French Ambulance Service.

When the Germans invaded France, she fled to Spain, but customs officials, finding that she did not have entry documents, arrested her. Virginia might have had a long stay in a Spanish jail if not for the help of a prostitute whom she befriended. The girl lied to the magistrate, claiming she knew Virginia and that she simply lost her papers. "I don't know how long I would have wallowed in that jail if that woman had not helped me," she later told a British reporter. After her release, Virginia met a British intelligence agent who worked for the Special Operations Executive (SOE), the organization responsible for arming and directing French guerrillas. When he discovered that she was fluent in French and German, he immediately recruited her.

Virginia proceeded to join the French underground, who furnished her with phony identification papers. Now she was Marcella Montagne, a clerk in Paris. She aided the partisans by sending radio messages to London on German activities, by carrying out acts of sabotage, and by rescuing political prisoners. Her French friends affectionately called her "la dame qui boite," the limping lady. In early 1942 with the German Gestapo on her heels, she relocated to Lyons in Vichy France and began espionage work out of an apartment. She assisted with the return to England of downed American aircrews and escaped prisoners. Gestapo agents, having made a sketch of her by interrogating prisoners, continued to search for her, which forced her to work clandestinely from hole-in-wall bistros and restaurants. Virginia's capture appeared so imminent that the SOE recalled her to London. She made her escape by crossing the Pyrenees Mountains in the dead of winter.

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Before starting her journey, she radioed London saying she hoped “Cuthbert” would not be troublesome. SOE authorities replied, “If Cuthbert troublesome, eliminate him.” Her friends in London had forgotten that “Cuthbert” was the nickname for her artificial leg.

After making a difficult escape through Spain, Virginia was safe in London, but she remained eager for another mission. General Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), needed experienced agents in France to hamper the German war effort as D-Day approached in 1944. When Virginia learned of the expected invasion, she immediately volunteered. Despite questions about her disability, her record spoke for itself. Virginia Hall, once again, entered France clandestinely on March 21, 1944 by parachute with her wooden leg under her arm. For two months she toiled away as a radio operator. After the invasion and a few close calls, she organized three combat units of resistance fighters that harassed and often decimated enemy units moving west to reinforce German units at Normandy. She also aided downed allied flyers back to friendly positions. Many survivors were told that the famous limping lady had secured their escape route.

When Colonel Heinz Jost, the SS intelligence chief, learned that the notorious Marcella Montagne had returned to France, he became incensed and placed her on the most wanted list of the Gestapo. In one instance, she left a hotel just one hour before SS troops surrounded it.

For her efforts Virginia Hall was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. At her request the ceremony was held in private. Despite General Donovan’s offers to have President Harry Truman present the medal, she refused recognition. After the war, she continued her clandestine career in the Central Intelligence Agency, the successor to the OSS.

ASA Women Led The Way In “This Man’s Army”

By Karen Kovach

INSCOM History Office

“There are going to be more women in this man’s Army doing more jobs than ever before; times are changing,” reported *Soldiers* magazine in 1973.

The Army has led the way in many vital programs, one of which was the placement of women into jobs once considered open only to men, and Army intelligence has led the Army.

The decision to end the draft, taken 2 years earlier, forced the U.S. Army Security Agency (forerunner of U.S. Army Intelligence and Security Command) to relook the use of women in military intelligence-related occupational specialties. It was a matter of record that WACs (Women’s Army Corps) in World War II had performed signals intelligence duties as well as men.

In June 1971, the Commanding General USASA requested authority from the Department of the Army to open cryptologic training to women as a “hedge against the possibility that USASA would not be able to recruit men in sufficient numbers to meet mission requirements.” This authority was granted, and USASA enlisted its first WAC, Linda Gayle Norris.

The number of women in USASA rose steadily during the next few years, and they were increasingly assigned to direct, mission-oriented positions. In 1973 women soldiers took part in a U.S. Readiness Command Joint Forces Training Exercise for the first time. PFC Patricia L. Jackson and SP4 Diane M. Jones, ASA’s first female communications security (COMSEC) specialists, participated in GALLANT HAND 73. They were the only two women among the approximately 37,000 participants.

Just 30 years ago, the full integration of women into the Army was a subject of controversy, but women in military intelligence had long proven their ability to perform skilled technical work and to serve in leadership positions.



Photo credit: INSCOM Archives

Spc Diane M. Jones (right) and Pfc Patricia L. Jackson, Communications Security Specialists from Fort Sam Houston, Texas, were the first two women to participate in an Army field training exercise - Gallant Hand, 1973